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ABSTRACT

Since 1979 collaborative activities in continuing education for human services workers in Montana have shown that combining training efforts among agencies and higher education units provides better instruction at a considerable savings in cost and particularly suits rural agencies with small training budgets and small, widely dispersed staffs. Planning efforts should first consider needs and resources of the target area. Any cooperating agency or working group must commit itself to share in the planning and costs (in-kind contributions constitute suitable cost sharing), and to provide a specific number of training participants for each activity. Planning is done by developing three menus ranging from A Menu (all possible training topics and needs) to C Menu (refined, final training needs lists). It is best to decide against shared training when courses are so specialized that only employees in a given job specialty can benefit. Problems are sometimes caused by philosophical differences in professional practice orientations of various agencies; if differences can be handled, greater understanding of diverse practices can result. Adequate planning can eliminate or reduce some agencies' tendency to protect their professional "turf." Montana now needs a human services training consortium to coordinate efforts and disseminate information about training events. (BRR)

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"Collaborative Continuing Education and Staff Training in Rural Areas"

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Collaborative Staff Training in Rural Areas

Our collaborative activities in continuing education for human-services workers in Montana began in 1979. Our experience since has shown us that, when we combine the training resources of two or more state social agencies, the amount and quality of the instruction provided is greatly improved.

We have involved universities, social-service organizations, and law-enforcement agencies in the joint sponsorship of many short courses and workshops around the state. This sort of shared learning has generated many benefits. It also has permitted us to offer continuing-education units and college credits to our trainees, who have included social workers, nurses, police personnel, lawyers, nursing-home operators, and citizens.

The impetus for collaboration was the difficulty of providing training to small agency staffs in remote parts of a large state. There are many local offices but they are far-flung and are staffed by few people -- sometimes just one or two individuals. Our training resources were just not adequate to serve these small, isolated units (Horejsi & Deaton, 1977).

We then considered the training needs of other agencies -- those that shared similar clientele, program goals, or professional interests. The next step was to undertake, with these agencies, the joint planning of occasional workshops on an ad hoc basis. Following this experimental phase, a group of administrators responsible for the training of human-service workers in children's programs was organized. Its members included the state university's coordinator of continuing education in social work, the specialist for teaching in-service training, the training supervisor in the state social-services

agency, a representative from youth corrections institutions, and an officer from juvenile probation. From time to time others attended as the new agency interested them. The group discussed forthcoming training events, future educational needs, and funding issues at its monthly meetings. Eventually, the original body evolved into a consortium of training specialists from state and federal agencies in Montana.

Our experience over the past five years has yielded some clear guidelines for cooperative educational ventures in social services for rural areas. Because our efforts were experimental, we have learned a lot about what does not work -- as well as what does.

Planning efforts for rural localities should first consider the needs and resources of the target area (Johnson, 1980). We decided to focus on training needs in select, high-priority social services (as perceived by the program administrators or service providers theselves). A working rule adopted early was that any cooperating agency or working group had to commit itself to share in the planning, to help pay the costs of training, and to provide a target number of training participants for each activity.

Of course, not all cooperating agencies have sizable training and conference funds to support educational projects. So, some groups have provided in-kind resources -- in the form of publicity, meeting space, refreshments, or co-instructors. The guiding principle is that the collaborators share in the costs according to the percentage of participants they send to a course or workshop. Trainee numbers are estimated in advance for planning purposes.

As an example, consider foster-care placement: It is provided in Montana by child-protection workers of the state agency and by juvenile probation officers of local youth courts. About one-third of the participants in joint

workshops on foster placement were probation officers. Training costs for the workshop were typically $900, which included travel and fees for an instructor, meeting-room rental, and educational materials (handouts, films, flip charts). Shares were allocated by having the probation officers' group pay for the meeting room and educational materials (a total of about $300), with the state agency paying instructor costs (about $600).

Other kinds of arrangements are possible. In one instance, a course on single-parent and reconstituted families was planned for 25 social workers in the public agency. A private children's residential treatment center wanted to send five staff members to the class but had no training funds to pay its twenty-percent share. Instead, it provided a co-instructor who discussed the treatment of emotionally disturbed children from troubled families.

Collaborative sponsorship is an excellent way to provide on-site training in rural locations. For example, in Montana's northeast quarter (a seven-county area including a large Indian reservation), the state employs fewer than ten child-welfare social workers and only three or four probation officers. To receive professional training at a central site, these people had to travel 600 miles (or more) round trip. Thus, to attend workshops, these workers had to spend one to three days traveling, in addition to actual meeting time. The result in one- and two-person agencies was a virtual shutdown of services for a week at a time. Joint sponsorship alleviated much of this problem. Collaborative instruction provided trainee groups of 15-35 in northeastern Montana, and reduced participants' travel to commuting range.

Obviously, there are two important cost savings here. Agencies not only split the cost of producing the workshops, but they also significantly reduce staff travel costs.

Another bonus is that a lot of informal learning and sharing occurs when staffs from various agencies gather in the same training sessions. In several situations, gaps in service among local providers were identified. For instance, when child-welfare workers and probation officers attended a workshop on intervention and counseling in foster care, they discovered that each had assumed the other was providing ongoing services, when in many cases neither was. A division of labor and practical suggestions for counseling were developed. Thus a significant gain was realized simply because agency administrators had supported a joint training effort.

We have coordinated two statewide conferences for the community child abuse and neglect teams and for more specialized local sexual abuse teams. Participants from more than 30 areas included social workers, probation officers, county attorneys, nurses, school counselors, and representatives of tribal social services. By coming together, they were able to gain skills at working as team members as well as learning in other topical content areas.

Problems in Planning Co-sponsored Training

In almost every instance, our cooperative training ventures have been positive because we avoided predictable pitfals in the planning stages. The first decision, each time we considered a training event involving two or more professions or agencies, was whether the learning objectives and content actually met the needs of each. Sometimes, staff training or continuing professional education courses are specialized to the extent that only the employees in a given job specialty can benefit. In these cases, it usually is best to decide against shared training.

An alternative is to gear training to the target group, then to invite others to attend on an optional basis -- with the clear understanding that the focus will be narrow. Example: In planning workshops for adult-services workers on programs for the aging, we have allowed nursing-home operators and directors of senior-citizens' centers to attend, but with the understanding that the course was directed at providing social-work services to frail elderly people in their own homes.

Planning is done by developing three menus (A, B, C) as shown in Figure 1. The A menu is simply the development of all possible topics and issues that might be considered. In the next step (B menu), the first list is split. The administrative list includes those items that may be important organizational issues but cannot be addressed through training or educational programs. The training topics that remain as appropriate and important in the eyes of the planning group become the final list, the C menu.

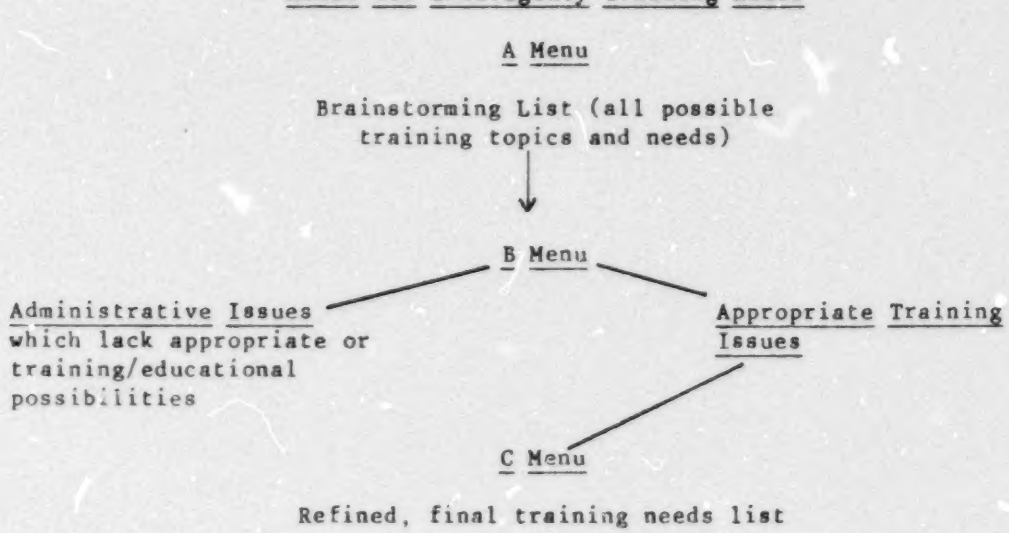
Menus for Interagency Training Needs
A Menu
Brainstorming List (all possible training topics and needs)
B Menu
Administrative Issues which lack appropriate or training/educational possibilities
Appropriate Training Issues
C Menu
Refined, final training needs list

Figure 1.

The early planning phase, using the menus, provides a method for dealing with inappropriate training requests from any of the agencies involved. Typical examples have included the misuse of training to "raise employee moral," to "change attitudes toward the clients," or to "sell the other agencies on our program." Occasionally, managers will expect too much of a short training program, such as a two-day workshop. To be ready to discuss specific, achievable training goals, course planners must have clearly developed learning objectives (Mager and Pipe, 1972) and a brief written agenda as the next step after developing the C menu.

Problems are sometimes caused by philosophical differences in the professional practice orientations of various agencies. We have encountered disagreements over the selection of certain trainers and consultants as well as enforcement personnel wanted an investigative and somewhat punitive approach; child-protection personnel were oriented more toward treatment. In this instance the instructor successfully accommodated both investigative and treatment viewpoints. The fortunate outcome was that the social workers came to appreciate the need for careful investigative procedures, and the law-enforcement people began to understand the need for treatment for the family.

Sometimes it is a good idea to recognize and accommodate different philosophical issues in the training design. Debates by professionals who hold contrasting points of view can clarify differences of orientation and can increase understanding on both sides. Another technique is to plan sectional meetings within a conference, so that special-interest groups may meet separately to address their own issues.

Another planning difficulty concerns some agencies' tendency to protect their professional "turf." We have found that if the planning has been thorough

and addresses the points cited previously, agencies rarely fail to cooperate. We consider training a straightforward function designed "to help individuals develop abilities that serve the organization's purposes" (David, 1974, p. 13). The planning process usually culls those who are defensive about protecting their agency or profession, or who wish to use training events for propaganda purposes; typically they simply choose not to participate in joint training efforts.

Future Directions and Further Refinements

The synergetic and synergistic possibilities of collaborative training are intriguing. The process of blending the training of human-services personnel with a variety of professional orientations and abilities may let us develop new ways of serving the needs of special client groups. And it may well provide answers to a number of questions. How can we serve families and children affected by the Indian Child Welfare Act? What are the current needs of Asian and Carribean refugees who have been here now for several years? How should we serve the new elderly who are in better health, have more money, and demonstrate greater creativity than those in the past? What are the long-term needs of middle-aged breadwinners who lose their jobs to industrial plant closures?

Montana needs a human-services training consortium to coordinate efforts and disseminate information about training events. Many pieces of the system already exist. The training directors of state agencies now meet regularly. The Office of Public Instruction has developed a computerized bank of training consultants and resources. And we now have a positive history of agencies working together to develop workshops and conferences of mutual interest.

Still, to plan future efforts, we need a means of evaluating our cooperative training courses. Current evaluation procedures focus only on the outcome of a particular course without providing much information for future training.

Summary

The Montana experience indicates that collaborative training efforts among agencies and higher-education units provide better instruction at a considerable savings in cost. As in any other training and educational program, however, sound planning is required. Cooperative training is particularly useful to rural agencies that have small training budgets and whose staffs are small and widely dispersed.

Notes

Charles Horejsi & Robert Deaton, "The Cracker Barrel Classroom: Rural Programming for Continuing Education," Journal of Education for Social Work, V-13 N3, Fall 1977, 37-43.

Louise Johnson, "Human Service Delivery Patterns in Non-Metropolitan Communities," Rural Human Services, H. Wayne Johnson, Ed., Peacock Publishers, 1980, 65-74.

Robert Mager and Peter Pipe, Analyzing Performance Problems, Fearon Publishing Company, 1972.

Larry Nolan Davis, Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Workshops, Learning Concepts, Inc., 1974.

DEVELOPING A MENU OF POSSIBLE INTER-AGENCY TRAINING NEEDS*

A Menu - Brainstorming List: (all the important perceived needs we have right now)

1.	11.
2.	12.
3.	13.
4.	14.
5.	15.
6.	16.
7.	17.
8.	18.
9.	19.
10.	20.

B Menu - Split: (from the list above, make two lists: 1) administrative needs that have no apparent training component, e.g., "worker morale," and 2) training needs that have a clear training component)

Administrative	Training
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.

*Bob Deaton and Jon Vestre, 1984.

C Menu - Refined Inter-Agency Training List: (review the training list from B Menu. List those that appear appropriate for inter-agency training. Designate agency potential cooperating agencies)

	Topic	Agency
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		